



# Special Procedures

## *Accreditation Programs*

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### Introduction

These special procedures contain an overview of USDA-APHIS-PPQ accreditation programs established to facilitate the exportation of commodities to foreign markets. Accreditation recognizes consistent levels of competency and confers specific authority. Accrediting trained personnel, organizations, facilities, and processes associated with phytosanitary functions enhances USDA-APHIS-PPQ's ability to protect plant resources and facilitate safe trade.

Direct questions about USDA-APHIS-PPQ accreditation programs to Mr. Michael Ward, National Accreditation Program Manager, by phone at 301-734-5227, by FAX at 301-734-7639, or by e-mail at <[michael.d.ward@aphis.usda.gov](mailto:michael.d.ward@aphis.usda.gov)>.

Two accreditation programs initiated by USDA-APHIS-PPQ are as follows:

- ◆ **Accreditation of Authorized Certification Officials**
- ◆ **Seed Health Accreditation Program**

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### Accreditation of Authorized Certification Officials

An accreditation program was initiated by USDA-APHIS-PPQ in order to comply with the North American Plant Protection Organization (NAPPO) standard for the accreditation of individuals to sign Federal phytosanitary certificates. Refer to the following web site address for additional information:

<http://www.nappo.org/>

This ACO accreditation program will ensure that USDA-APHIS-PPQ and our cooperators strictly adhere to current regulations and policies for inspecting and certifying plants and plant products offered for export.

For details about individual responsibilities for obtaining and maintaining accreditation, see USDA-APHIS-PPQ's *ACO Quality Manual* located at the following web site address:

<<http://www.aphis.usda.gov/ppq/pim/accreditation>>

### **Initial Accreditation**

ACOs are required to meet education, experience, and training qualifications before becoming accredited to issue Federal plant export certificates. Once all qualifications are met, Export Services grants accreditation and notifies all parties involved. The initial accreditation is valid for 3 years from date of issue. Section One of the *ACO Quality Manual* covers initial accreditation for PPQ officer candidates, while Section Two covers State or county cooperators.

### **Reaccreditation of ACOs**

Before their initial accreditation expires, ACOs **must** be reaccredited. ACOs **must** complete reaccreditation training and successfully pass a renewal exam. Reaccreditation is valid for 3 years from date of issue.

### **Review Process for Federal Plant Export Certificates**

Supervisors of ACOs and Export Certification Specialists (ECSs) are responsible for regularly reviewing issued Federal plant export certificates for compliance with Federal regulations, policies and procedures, foreign import requirements, and USDA-APHIS-PPQ obligations to bilateral agreements, protocols, Memorandums of Understanding, and international standards. Major errors are documented by ECSs and communicated to ACOs and their supervisors to deter recurrences. If within a 12-month period an ACO makes three or more major errors or repeats the same major error after counseling, then that ACO's accreditation will be suspended.

### **Inactivation and Reactivation of ACOs**

ACOs can be placed in an inactive status if they fail to get reaccredited within a three-year period, fail to issue Federal plant export certificates within one year of initial accreditation, or fail to issue Federal plant export certificates within a two-year period of time. ECSs place ACOs in the inactive status and notify the ACOs. When placed in an inactive status, ACOs are **not** allowed to issue or sign Federal plant export certificates. ACOs may be reactivated once they complete 60 days of regulatory experience under an active ACO, and reaccreditation training.

### Suspension and Reactivation of ACOs

ACOs can be suspended from issuing Federal plant export certificates if they are suspected of knowingly or deliberately signing a fraudulent certificate with any intentional false statement or misrepresentation, or if within a 12-month period they make three or more major errors or repeat the same major error after counseling. Supervisors, ECSs, or regional export program officials can recommend suspension, while the final determination to suspend an ACO's accreditation lies with the regional export program official. Suspension is for one year. Suspended ACOs can be reactivated once they complete Export Certification Training and successfully pass an exam.

### Retesting

If a candidate or ACO fails an exam, then they have up to 45 days to retest. If a candidate or ACO fails a retest, then they have up to 45 days to pass a second retest. If the candidate or ACO fails the second retest, then they **must** complete one year of regulatory experience and retake the appropriate test.

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## Seed Health Accreditation Program

USDA-APHIS-PPQ in cooperation with the National Seed Health System initiated a process by which non government entities can become accredited to perform the following testing and inspections for plants or plant products that are required for the issuance of Federal plant export certificates:

- ◆ Laboratory seed health testing (laboratory-based program to test seeds for plant pathogens using the standardized methods approved by the National Seed Health System)
- ◆ Phytosanitary field inspection (field-based inspections of seed producing fields, nurseries, or greenhouses for disease freedom using standardized methods approved by the National Seed Health System)
- ◆ Seed sampling for seed health laboratory testing (sampling of seeds using standardized methods approved by the National Seed Health System and forwarded by a traceable method to a government or accredited laboratory to conduct seed health laboratory tests)
- ◆ Visual inspections of seeds for phytosanitary certification (visual inspection of seed shipments using USDA-APHIS-PPQ approved methods at the exporter's facility for insects, weed seeds, soil, and other contaminants before issuing a Federal plant export certificate)

**The most current information about the entities that have been accredited and the functions they are allowed to perform can be found on the APHIS webpage under Phytosanitary Issues Management – Accreditation.**

Each non government entity is audited and evaluated by the National Seed Health System under the direct supervision of the National Accreditation Program Manager for USDA-APHIS-PPQ. Upon successful completion of the initial audit and with the approval of USDA-APHIS-PPQ, the entity becomes accredited. Each entity is accredited to perform certain functions which are listed on a letter of accreditation that is issued by USDA-APHIS-PPQ.

Accredited entities provide a written report of their findings to the Authorized Certification Official (ACO). The report should include dates for each function the entity did. The written findings become part of the supporting documentation that is attached to the Issuing Office Copy of the certificate.

ACOs **cannot** issue certificates for plants or plant products that:

- ◆ Underwent testing or inspection performed by an accredited entity for which that entity was **not** accredited to perform
- ◆ Were the subject of an activity performed by an entity **not** during the period for which the entity was accredited

USDA-APHIS-PPQ's National Accreditation Program Manager oversees that accredited entities maintain compliance with the standards as specified in the Code of Federal Regulations through annual audits and proficiency testing. Accreditation is valid for 3 years and can be renewed after a thorough audit is performed by USDA-APHIS-PPQ and the National Seed Health System.

ACOs may accept documented results from accredited entities for accredited phytosanitary function(s). These documented results serve to determine eligibility to issue Federal plant export certificates for seeds intended for propagation.

Accredited entities are required to use **only** those tests and methods that are listed in *Reference Manual B* to perform the specified phytosanitary functions for which they are accredited to perform. For more information about these tests and methods, go to the following National Seed Health System web site address:

<http://excerpt.ceris.purdue.edu/htbin/exleave.com?addr=http://www.seedhealth.org>